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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a qualitative investigation of the impact of gender on administrator decision-making within the college environment. The research compared 5 male and 5 female college administrators from 10 different metropolitan campuses in the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System. All were directors of customized training departments with similar responsibilities. In initial interviews, administrators familiar with them selected from a list of 62 leadership-related adjectives. Then the raters were asked in a group discussion to review what the terms implied about the administrator's management style in dealing with such concerns as time, money, staff, and space; procedures and processes used to perform tasks; sharing and discussing concerns with staff; growth and development opportunities for staff; and issues such as strategies for resolving problems and improving organizational performance. These keywords were matched with decision-making styles using a categorical taxonomy related to perceived masculine and feminine leadership styles. The researchers found that gender differences played only a minimal role, though female leaders were slightly more consultative and participatory in most situations. (Contains 31 references.) (RKJ)

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The Impact of Gender on Decision Making among Customized Training Administrators within the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System (MnSCU)

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Abstract

This paper presents a qualitative investigation of the impact of gender on decision making among specified administrators within a college environment. The research capitalizes on the opportunity to compare men and women in "matched" professional positions within higher education – a field where female leadership is well established. The researcher used descriptive terms identified during staff interviews (N= 86) to categorize the decision-making style of ten college administrators (5 male, 5 female – each from a different campus) for each of six functional areas of leadership. While the researcher found more similarities than differences, some gender-related trends in decision making were identified.

The Impact of Gender on Decision Making among Customized Training Administrators within the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System (MnSCU)

This study focuses on gender differences in "matched" leadership positions within higher education. Prior to 1990, studying gender differences in leadership-related topics such as decision making was hampered by gender inequities and a lack of women in top-level administrator roles (Bass, 1990; Bartol & Martin, 1986; Dobbins & Platz, 1986). As more women have become responsible for major organizational decisions, it has created both the opportunity and need to conduct additional research of men and women in "matched" leadership positions (Fields & Wolff, 1991; Jacobs & Lim, 1992; Colwill, 1993; Still, 1997).

Gender Research: Prolific and Ambiguous

Background

Literature surrounding gender differences and how those differences impact decision-making processes or one's success as a leader are both prolific and ambiguous. When Eagly and Johnson (1990) conducted one of the first comprehensive reviews of gender differences in leadership, their study revealed mixed findings. Some researchers support evident gender differences (Kline, 1998; Cherney, 1999; Chanlin, 1999). Other researchers such as Caporrimo (1998) question the validity of "real" gender differences contending that there are "other critical variables that contribute to individual differences within, as well as between groups" (pp. 11-12).

Gender Differences: Supporting Evidence

Gender roles appear to affect not only how individuals behave in decision-making groups but also how members react to group experiences and decisions (McGraw &

Bloomfield, 1987). Korabik (1990) found that masculine-oriented group members prefer task-oriented roles and feminine-oriented group members focused on social-emotional roles. Carless (1998) found that women use a more participative and inclusive style of leadership and men rely on a directive, controlling style. According to McFadden (1984) the differences between men and women are both radical and ineradicable. Radecki's (1996) research on decision-making orientations and decision-making skills found that "masculinity and femininity serve as significant predictors for decision making" (p.76). The results of Radecki's study revealed that masculinity was a significant predictor of one's decision-making orientation and that both masculinity and femininity serve as significant predictors of one's decision-making skills (pp.76-95). Chanlin's (1999) study provided further evidence that females and males perceive and process information differently.

Men tend to use position, hierarchy, and personal power to promote self-advancement; Women focus on collegiality, teamwork, and empowerment of others (Bennis, 1990; Rosener, 1990). Helgesen (1990) went so far as to state, "An organization led by women is more inclusive, a place where the value for connectedness is nurtured" (p.224).

Gender Differences: Contrary Evidence

Sociologists such as Hatch (1997) contend that there are more similarities than differences, and the differences traditionally accentuated are an outcome of "gender construction," not real differences (p.293). Lott's (1997) observations reinforce the position that social roles and constructs shape gender-related behaviors. "Despite all the conditions in our society that push girls and boys and then women and men, into different

spheres, the differences so painstakingly searched for by gender difference researchers are small indeed and always overshadowed by the much larger overlap between genders and by within-gender variability" (p.279).

Despite claims that men and women differ greatly in how they communicate and interact, considerable research indicates that gender differences play a small role in explaining differences in cognitive and behavioral processes related to communication (Eagly, 1987, Weaver, Fitch-Hauser, Villaume, & Thomas, 1993; Wood, 1993). Kirtley's (1999) investigation of communication styles found that "variance explained by gender was trivial" (p.190). Kirtley found that "gender role differences appear to provide a better explanation for variations in communication styles than sex differences"(p.190).

Gender Differences: The Existence of Androgyny

Using biological sex as the sole predictor or primary variable is insufficient in identifying "gender differences" in cognition and communication (Rancer & Dierks-Stewart, 1990; Kim & Bresnahan, 1996). Canary and Hause (1993) found that sex differences account for only 1% of the variance in social interactions. Many social scientists and communication researchers are abandoning the use of biological sex as the primary predictor of gender differences and are applying the concept of "psychological gender" to the study of cognition and communication (Kim, 1997; Rancer & Dierks-Stewart, 1990). Marsh and Byrne (1991) argue that it is possible for an individual to be and display both masculine and feminine characteristics (androgyny).

Kirchmeyer (1996) examined the level of androgyny in groups and its impact on decision-making outcomes. Findings of Kirchmeyer's study indicated, "Neither masculinity nor femininity itself made a significant contribution to decision quality.

Groups with high levels of androgyny across all members made higher quality decisions" (p.655). Kirchmeyer also found that femininity itself, not androgyny, was the most reliable predictor of group satisfaction and commitment to the decision.

Gender Differences: Stereotypes and Roles

Researchers continue to find empirical evidence supporting the view of behavioral similarity between men and women with similar backgrounds, positions, and situations. Eagly and Johnson (1990) found that gender behaviors vary according to the fit between gender roles and organizational setting. For example, women were found to be more task-oriented then men in organizations that were female dominated. Men were more task-oriented than women in male-oriented settings. In addition, female leaders were less likely to be relational and democratic if responsible for a traditional male-oriented position.

Robinson's (1998) research summary says, "In practice, gender has only moderate explanatory power as a predicator variable in most domains of behavior" (p. 826). Carli (1999) points out that perceived levels of power have more to do with personal variables than gender. Regardless of gender, people use more direct or assertive forms of influence when they feel relatively powerful (Hirokawa, 1990, 1991; Sagestano, 1992; Steil & Hillman, 1993). In other words, gender differences in influence strategies tend to be minimal when women and men have relatively similar power.

Mertz's (1997) examination of administrative decision making among high school principals found, "The responses of female and male administrators were more alike than different…the overall pattern of similar, if not identical, results suggests that role

influences administrative decision making more than gender" (Conference Presentation, Annual meeting of the University Council for Educational Administration).

Study Assumptions, Purpose, Design, and Methodology

Study Assumptions and Purpose Statement

As an administrator within MnSCU, this researcher works extensively with both men and women in leadership roles. Based on personal experience and observation, leader-managers differ in their capabilities and decision-making processes. The researcher questioned if variations in one's approach to decision making related to gender differences or other factors. This researcher's perspective is that men and women are equal -- but different -- and that both can make good decisions and be capable leaders.

The purpose of this research is to investigate the role of gender in decision making by studying "matched" leader-manager positions within higher education. Matched studies in other fields, such as those conducted by Steffensmeier (1999) on judges and Mertz (1997) on high school principals, provide an updated view to questions of whether and how gender affects decision making in situations where factors such as position, power, experience, and credibility are equal. MnSCU is a "young" organization (founded July 1, 1995). It was a merger formed by legislation that brought together two distinctly different cultures – the technical colleges and the liberal arts colleges. Little research has been done on the leadership styles of individuals within this new system. This study contributes to a better understanding of the impact of gender on decision-making among leader-managers within MnSCU's Customized Training Divisions.

Research Design

In this study leadership functions assessed are based on categories established by Morse and Wagner (1978). The leader-manager functions they identified are:

- Managing the organization's environment and its resources
- Organizing and coordinating work
- Information handling
- Providing for staff growth and development
- Motivating others and handling conflicts
- Strategic problem solving

Leader utilization of specific decision-making styles was assessed using a modified version of a leadership/decision-making continuum similar to those developed by Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1958) and Vroom and Yetton (1973). Rater comments about the leader-manager's decision-making behaviors for each functional area of leadership were categorized as indicating a directive, consultative, participative, or empowering style.

Potential Problems/Moderating Variables

Several potential confounding factors were considered in designing this research project:

- Scope of Responsibility – Differences in the subject's type and scope of leadership responsibilities would make it difficult to make direct comparisons between "leaders."
- Geographic Location – Leadership styles and how they are perceived are influenced by social expectations (Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992;

Hirokawa, Mickey, & Muira, 1991; Offermann & Kearney, 1988; Steil & Weltman, 1992). It is possible that a leader's use of certain decision-making styles may be influenced by whether the study participant is based at a rural or metropolitan campus. Minnesota's rural communities typically represent a more traditional, conservative, blue-collar, male-dominated environment.

- During pilot studies conducted at two of MnSCU's campuses in preparation for this research project, participants suggested that community and technical colleges have significantly different cultures. Participants felt technical colleges value a more directive style of leadership and community colleges more of a participatory style.
- Gender Equity – Although changing, gender studies of "matched" leadership roles are still hampered by male dominance in many fields.
- Rater Familiarity with the Leader – The results of this study will be based on rater perceptions. Factors such as length of employment could influence how familiar the rater is with the leader's decision-making style.
- The researcher is an "insider" – an administrator within the MnSCU system. The researcher is familiar with all the subjects in the study, and reports directly to one of the female administrators.

Controlling Study Variables

- Focusing the research on like positions within a single organizational system mitigated differences in leadership scope and responsibility. The administrators to be assessed in this research, based on their scope of responsibility and authority, are best referred to as leader-managers. Gardner

(1986) made a distinction between leader-managers and routine managers. According to Gardner, routine managers focus on day-to-day operations while the leader-manager demonstrates both leadership and management functions. The functional overlap between managing and leading is particularly evident in large, complex, hierarchal organizations (Bass, 1990, p.384). MnSCU fits Bass's description of a "large, complex, hierarchal organization."

All ten administrators being assessed in this study direct a customized training department on one of MnSCU's Twin Cities' campuses. As leader-managers, their responsibilities include a broad cadre of leadership functions including task roles, socio-emotional concerns, organizing, planning, motivating, goal setting, and controlling various resources (based on administrator interviews and a review of their position descriptions). All supervise full and part-time employees. Participants have a minimum of a bachelor's degree.

- Concerns about rural versus urban differences were addressed by limiting the research to metropolitan campuses. The ten organizations included in this study comprise Customized Training Departments within the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System's (MnSCU) two-year Twin Cities (Minneapolis/St. Paul) campuses.
- To assess concerns about cultural differences on community and technical colleges, responses were tracked and assessed based on campus-type as well as by gender. In the study group four campuses are community colleges and four are technical colleges. Two of the ten campuses studied are consolidated campuses – one entity representing a merged community and technical

college. For comparative purposes, one consolidated campus was assigned to the technical college culture and one to the community college culture based on the primary work experience and background (technical college or community college) of the administrator being assessed. Although campus-wide missions and cultures may vary, the customized training departments within both technical and community colleges share a common mission -- to "serve the needs of business and industry and to improve the productivity and employability of individuals within the workforce" through credit and non-credit, traditional and non-traditional forms of education (MnSCU Customized Training Network Conference, 1999).

- Women are established and recognized as leaders within the educational field. Women comprised half of the study population. (Addresses concerns about gender equity within the field of study)
- All raters are direct reports of the customized training department's administrator. Raters have at least one year of employment within the department. (Addresses concerns about familiarity with leader).
- Creating structured questions, and ensuring confidentiality addressed concerns about the researcher's familiarity with both the leader-managers being assessed and many of the raters. Written responses to questions were submitted unsigned. Rater comments during focus group discussions were voluntary. Prior to the research, the researcher made personal contact with the customized training administrator at each targeted campus to explain the

purpose and methodology of this study, and to solicit permission to interview staff.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection Methods

The researcher developed a two-step interview process. Step one involved asking raters to provide written responses to six questions. Rater responses were chosen from an alphabetical list of sixty terms related to decision making provided by the researcher. Raters could add descriptive terms not included on the provided list. This exercise took approximately twelve to fifteen minutes. Step two, conducted immediately after step one was completed, involved a focus group-type discussion where raters were asked, on an item-by-item basis, to review their choice of descriptive terms and to "Tell the researcher in their own words what they thought the terms they selected implied about their administrator's decision-making style in a specific leadership situation." Those not wishing to make comments in the focus group situation were invited to write comments, call or submit them via e-mail. The researcher recorded focus group comments. Part two of the interview process lasted approximately twenty minutes. At the end of each focus group discussion the researcher made field-notes regarding observations of the group as they interacted and responded to questions.

Discussion Guide Questions

For each item on the discussion guide, raters were asked to select 3-7 terms that best described how they perceived their administrator approached decision making in a specific leadership situation. Based on Morse and Wagner's (1978) list of leadership functions, questions raters were asked to respond to were:

1. How does your administrator make decisions about the allocation and utilization of departmental resources such as time, money, staff, and space? (Based on Morse and Wagner's leader-manager function – Managing the organization's environment and its resources).
2. How does your administrator make decisions about task assignments and the procedures and processes used to perform tasks? (Based on Morse and Wagner's leader-manager function – Organizing and coordinating work).
3. How does your administrator determine what information to share and discuss with staff? (Based on Morse and Wagner's leader-manager function – Information handling).
4. How does your administrator decide what growth and developmental opportunities are needed by and will benefit staff? (Based on Morse and Wagner's leader-manager function – Providing for staff growth and development).
5. How does your administrator determine how to respond to people-oriented issues such as conflicts and motivational needs? (Based on Morse and Wagner's leader-manager function – Motivating others and handling conflicts).
6. How does your administrator determine appropriate strategies for resolving problems and improving organizational performance? (Based on Morse and Wagner's leader-manager function – Strategic problem solving).

Raters were asked to select terms from the provided "Behavioral Description Sheet" based on what the terms implied about their administrator's communication style

and willingness to share decision-making power and responsibility with staff in each leadership situation.

Behavioral Terms

The list of sixty descriptive terms provided to raters was an alphabetically arranged list of fifteen synonyms each for four decision-making styles – directive, consultative, participative, and empowering. Participants were provided with the following examples:

- Terms such as "directing, controlling, or telling" imply the administrator makes the decision without input from others.
- Terms such as "consulting, conferring, or surveying" imply the administrator asks for input and ideas from others before deciding.
- Terms such as "participating, sharing, or joining" imply the administrator involves and gives others a voice in the decision-making process.
- Terms such as "delegating, appointing, or entrusting" imply the administrator empowers and encourages others to take responsibility for making the decision.

The researcher also conducted individual interviews with each administrator and asked how they perceived they made decisions, shared authority, and utilized staff input.

Data Analysis Procedures

Key words, descriptive behaviors, and examples shared by focus group members were matched with decision-making styles using a categorical taxonomy based on the list of synonyms for the words directive, consultative, participative, and empowering. By limiting rater descriptions to their administrator's decision-making behaviors for six

recognized leader-manager functions, the researcher was able to compare the frequency with which certain terms were used to describe male or female and technical college or community college administrators.

Charts showing responses by gender and type of campus culture (technical or community college) were developed to display comparative responses for each functional leadership area. Figures # 1- 4 are not intended to depict a quantitative analysis of data or the statistical significance of research findings; rather the figures visually show how often certain decision-making terms were used by raters (shown in the charts as a %) to describe their administrator's behaviors in given leadership situations. In figures # 1- 4, summary responses reflecting decision-making patterns for either male versus female or technical college versus community college administrators are compared.

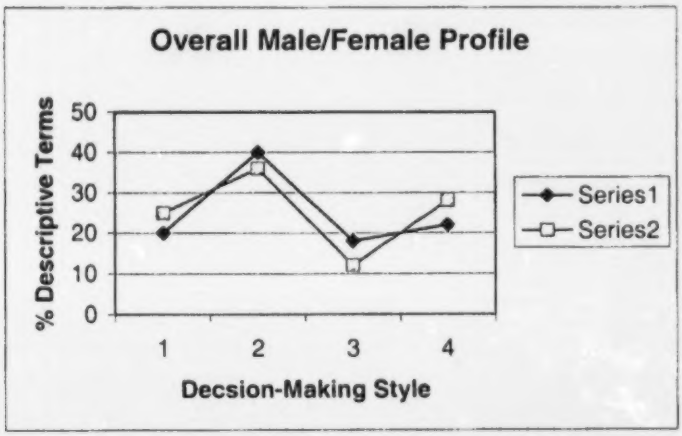
Results

Research Summary: Gender-Related Patterns

Figure #1 summarizes the decision-making profiles for the male and female administrators assessed in this study. The researcher found a subtle overall gender-related pattern indicating:

- Both genders were described as using a consultative decision-making style in most leadership situations.
- Participation was the least described decision-making style for both genders.
- Male administrators were described as being slightly more directive and empowering than female administrators in most leadership situations.
- Female administrators were described as being slightly more consultative and participatory than male administrators in most situations.

Figure #1: Summary of Male/Female Decision-Making Profiles



Key: In this chart series #1 depicts summary data for female administrators and series #2 depicts summary data for male administrators. Decision-making style "1" implies a directive style; "2" indicates a consultative style; "3"relates to a participative style; and, "4" shows an empowering style.

Figure #2 shows rater perceptions of male/female decision-making processes for separate leadership functions (see charts A-F).

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Figure #2: Male/Female Comparison by Leadership Functions

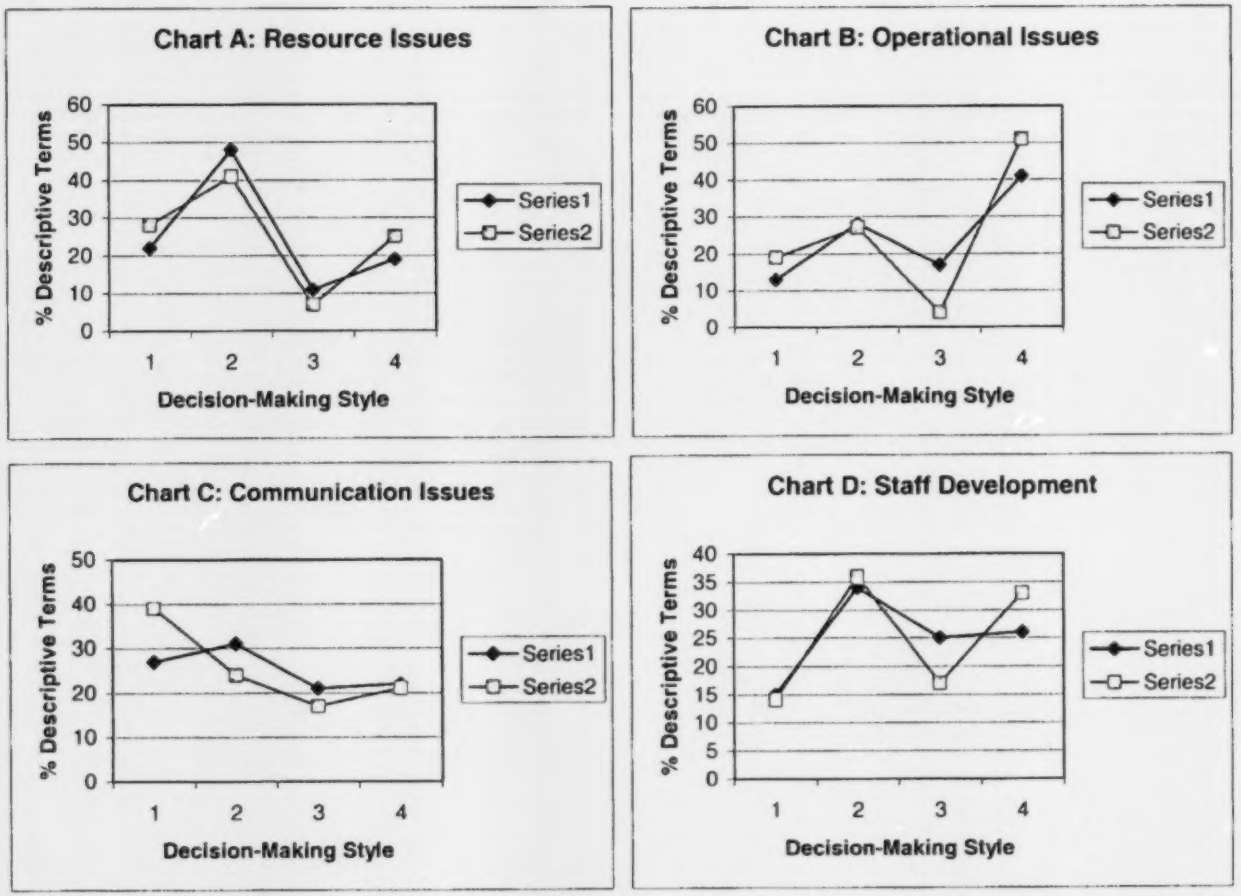

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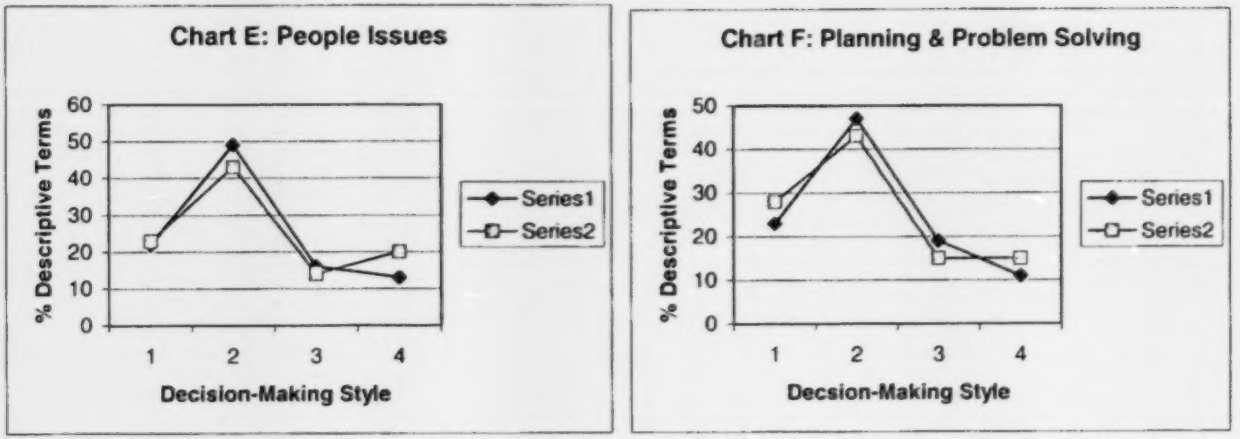
Figure #2: Male/Female Comparison by Leadership Functions (Continued)



Key: Each of the above charts summarizes staff perceptions of case study administrator decision-making styles for various leadership functions. In each chart series #1 depicts summary data for female administrators and series #2 depicts summary data for male administrators. Decision-making style "1" implies a directive style; "2" indicates a consultative style; "3"relates to a participative style; and, "4" shows an empowering style. Chart summaries are based the following: For female administrators N = 44 (11M, 33F) and a total of 1,027 descriptive terms. For male administrators N = 42 (16M, 26 F) and 833 descriptive terms.

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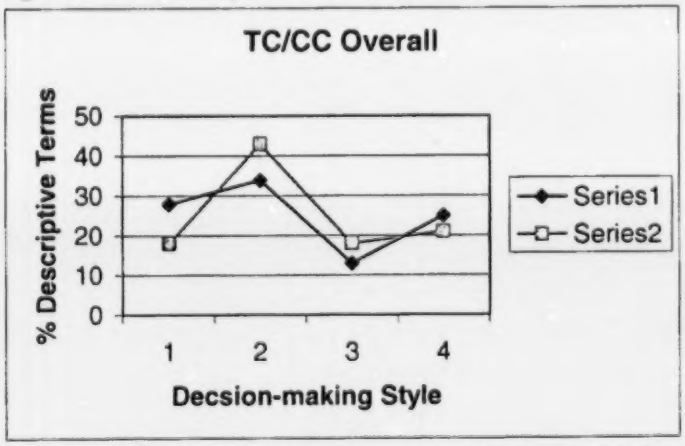
Research Summary: Technical Versus Community College Patterns

A comparison of rater feedback from technical colleges and community colleges, regardless of the gender of the administrator, showed the following (See Figure # 3 Summary TC/CC Comparisons):

- There are more similarities than differences in how administrators within the technical and community colleges make decisions.
- The technical college culture was less directive and the community college environment less participative than postulated by the researcher's pilot study groups.
- The overall technical college pattern (based on 3 males & 2 females) paralleled the decision-making profile for male administrators, and the community college pattern (based on 2 males & 3 females) closely resembled a female administrator's decision-making preferences.

Figure # 3: Summary TC/CC Comparison



Key: In this chart series #1 depicts summary data for technical college administrators and series #2 depicts summary data for community college administrators. Decision-making style "1" implies a directive style; "2" indicates a consultative style; "3"relates to a participative style; and, "4" shows an empowering style.

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Figure # 4: Technical and Community College Comparisons by Leadership Function (see charts A-F).

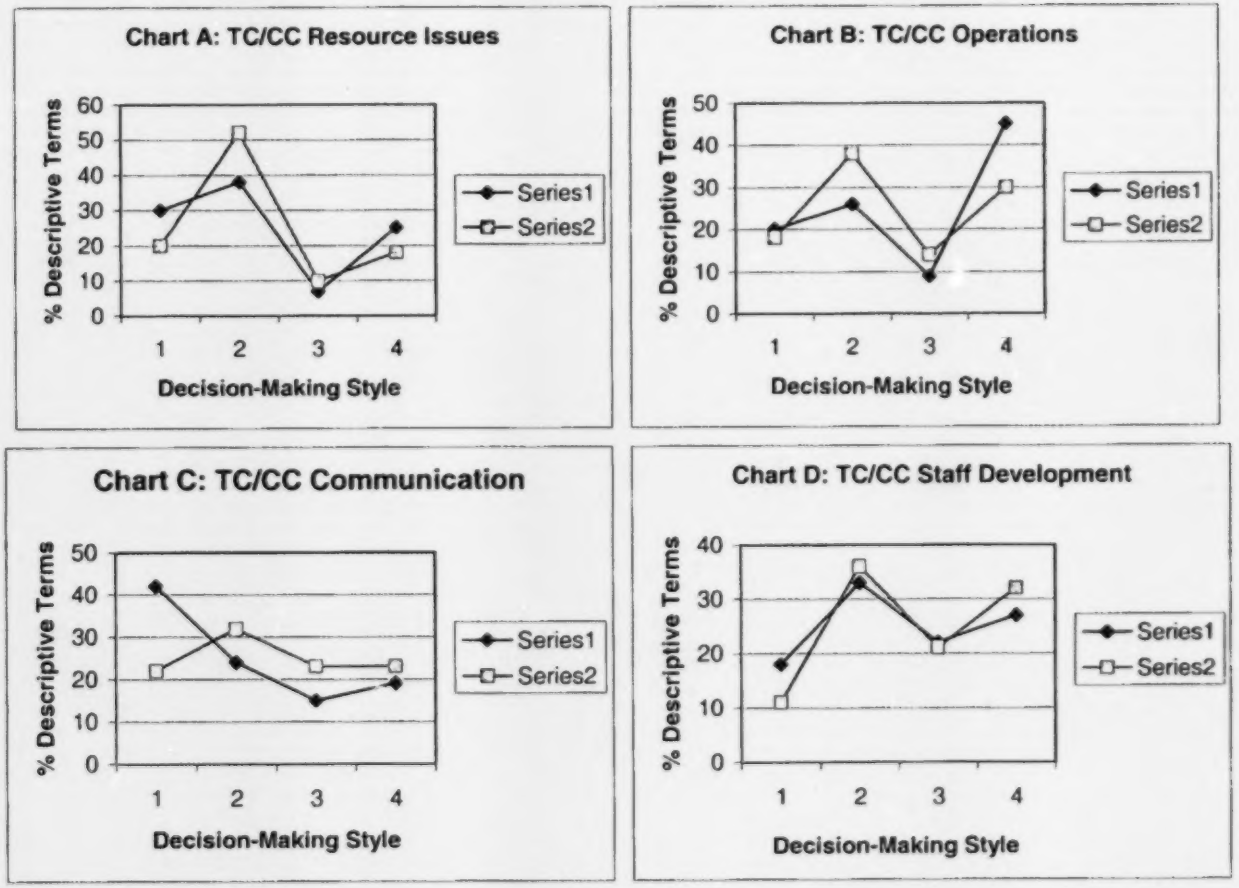

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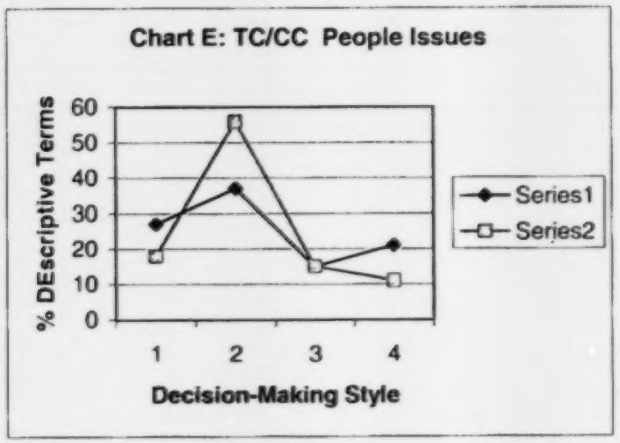
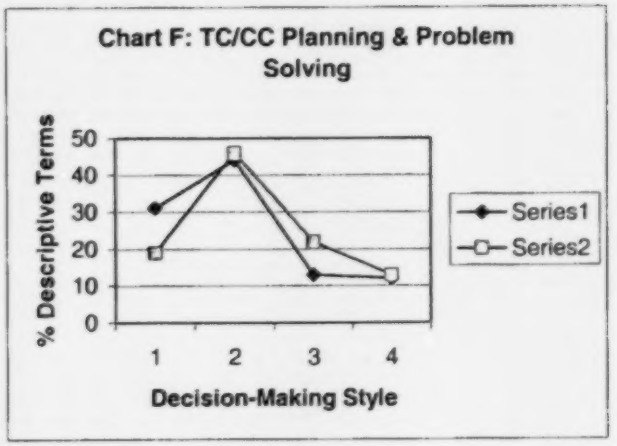
Figure # 4: Technical and Community College Comparisons by Leadership Function (Continued)





Key: Each of the above charts summarizes staff perceptions of case study administrator decision-making styles for various leadership functions. In each chart series #1 depicts summary data for technical college administrators and series #2 depicts summary data for community college administrators. Decision-making style "1" implies a directive style; "2" indicates a consultative style; "3"relates to a participative style; and, "4" shows an empowering style.

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Summary: Administrator Interviews

Interviews with case study administrators disclosed a high-level of awareness among both male and female administrators regarding directive and consulting behaviors. By contrast, male administrators viewed themselves as being more participative than their staff, and female administrators tended to perceive themselves as being more empowering – better at delegation than rater feedback indicated. In the researchers assessment, what male administrators described as "participation" typically involved consultative behaviors – a staff discussion followed by an administrative decision. The researcher also noted that female administrators seemed less inclined to "disengage" from a decision-making process – they preferred to work "with" an employee on a decision rather than empowering the employee to make the decision on their own.

Overall, the researcher noted only subtle differences in how male and female administrators described their approach to decision making. Both genders saw themselves as being primarily consultative and shifting to other decision-making styles such as a directive, empowering, or participative approach depending on the situation.

Discussion

Implications of Results

Rater and administrator feedback in this case study series supports the position that there are more similarities than differences between men and women in matched leadership roles (Hatch, 1997; Hirokawa, 1990, 1991; Sagestano, 1992; Steil & Hillman, 1993). This study challenges findings indicating that gender is a "significant predictor of decision making" (Radecki, 1996).

This study challenges the stereotypes that women in leadership are significantly more participative and empowering than their male counterparts (Bennis, 1990; Rosener, 1990; Helgesen, 1990), and that men are substantially more directive and controlling (Carless, 1998). This study supports the existence of androgyny – that an individual, regardless of gender, can display characteristics traditionally viewed as masculine or feminine.

This study challenges the perception that technical colleges foster a more hierarchal and directive leadership style, and that decisions made at community colleges are likely to be reached via a more participative process. While a comparison of the two college cultures did find technical colleges emulated a more "male model" (compare summary Figures # 1 and # 3), the differences between administrative decision making within the two college environments were more similar than different.

Strengths and Limitations

A major strength of this study was that it investigated the link between gender and decision making for matched leadership roles within a single college system. By limiting the study to the two-year campuses within the Twin Cities (Minneapolis/St. Paul), and soliciting rater feedback from all direct reports with at least a one-year work history with the administrator being assessed, the researcher was able to control a large number of possible moderating variables. It was fortunate that of the ten campuses in the study the ratio of male and female administrators was evenly split. Similarly, the study included four technical colleges, four community colleges, and two consolidated facilities – one managed by an administrator with a technical college background and the other by an administrator with a community college background.

A weakness of this study may have been the broad nature of the leadership questions raters were asked to respond to. The researcher received some rater feedback indicating that their administrator's likely decision-making processes within each leadership function would vary depending on situation variables. This concern seemed satisfactorily addressed by encouraging raters to think about "normative behaviors" rather than exceptions, and by reminding raters that they had the latitude to select a variety of descriptive terms, including conflicting terms, from the behavioral description sheet.

Based on focus group input, the researcher was able to categorize most new focus group terms within one of the four decision-making styles used in this study (directive, consultative, participative, empowering). For example, "consensus" was easily matched with a participative style, and words like "authoritarian" and "selective" with a directive style. However, some feedback did not lend itself well to categorical placement. Two comments that surfaced numerous times were that administrators were "so busy that decision making often times happened by default not design," and that "conflict-oriented decisions were often avoided." Therefore, it is possible that some rater feedback on perceived decision-making behaviors was influenced by factors other than gender.

Future Research

As women develop credibility as leaders and decision makers within traditionally male-dominated fields such as technology or manufacturing, opportunities to research gender differences in matched leadership roles will expand. In the meantime, higher education is a fertile field for additional matched leadership studies related to the impact of gender on decision making. Gender studies paralleling this investigation could be

conducted for other academic and student service administrators including the decision-making profiles for male and female college presidents.

Conclusion

Leadership characteristics such as directness versus indirectness, task-oriented versus relationship-oriented, or autocratic versus participatory decision making will likely, for the foreseeable future, continue to be viewed as gender dominated, stereotypical behaviors. According to Lott (1997), "The beliefs we share about gender are learned early, are subscribed to widely, and are so difficult to change because they are reinforced by social consensus, by structural arrangements that support and demand them, and by the operation of self-fulfilling prophecies" (p.19). However, this study and a preponderance of gender research conducted since 1990 supports the premise that gender differences, regardless of environmental context, play only a minimal role in the cognitive and behavioral processes that underlie communication, leadership, and decision making when men and women are in "matched" roles and endued with equal power (Weaver, Fitch-Hauser, Villaume & Thomas, 1993; Wood, 1989). The stereotype walls are slowly crumbling!

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